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ABSTRACT

In recent years, researchers have documented a convergence of gender roles in sexual interactions. In disagreement situations, where one partner desires a higher level of sexual activity than the other, man's traditional role was that of the aggressive initiator and woman's role was that of the passive recipient of unwanted sexual advances. Researchers have begun to study changes in these gender roles. This study was designed to determine whether this trend extends to behavior within sexual disagreement situations. Subjects were 139 male and 159 female unmarried heterosexual undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory class. Subjects provided information on a situation involving either a man's or a woman's desire for a higher level of sexual activity than their partner. Subjects reported more male initiated disagreement interactions (i.e., in which the man desired the higher level of sexual activity), although the majority reported female initiated disagreement interactions. For the most part, men and women used similar verbal and nonverbal behaviors to influence a date. Two exceptions were noted: men were more likely than women to verbally comply with a refusal and to stop all physical contact after a refusal. Also, subjects tended to view their own influence behavior in more positive terms than their partner's behavior. (ABL)

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Gender Differences in the Resolution of Sexual Disagreement Situations

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Gender Differences in the Resolution of Sexual Disagreement Situations

Lucia O'Sullivan, B.A., Kelli-an Lawrance, M.Sc., and E. Sandra Byers, Ph.D.

Researchers have begun to document a convergence of gender roles in sexual interactions. This study was designed to determine whether this trend extends to behavior within sexual disagreement situations. Participants provided information on a situation involving either a man's or a woman's desire for a higher level of sexual activity than their partner. Participants reported more male initiated disagreement interactions (i.e., in which the man desired the higher level of sexual activity), although the majority reported female initiated disagreement interactions. For the most part, men and women used similar verbal and nonverbal behaviors to influence a date. Two exceptions were noted: men were more likely than women to verbally comply with a refusal and to stop all physical contact after a refusal. Also, participants tended to view their own influence behavior in more positive terms than their partner's behavior.

Gender Differences in the Resolution of Sexual Disagreement Situations

In recent years, researchers have documented a convergence of gender roles in sexual interactions (Byers & Heinlein, 1989; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1989; Perper & Weis, 1987). In disagreement situations where one partner desires a higher level of sexual activity than the othe, men's traditional role was that of the aggressive initiator and women's role was that of the passive recipient of unwanted sexual advances. Researchers have begun to study changes in these gender roles (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Struckman-Johnson, 1988), but these studies have had several limitations. First, many have examined only behaviors used to influence a date to engage in sexual intercourse rather than all types of sexual activity. Second, they have focused on negative and/or coercive behaviors and ignored the use of more "positive" forms of influence strategies, such as flirting and complimenting one's partner. Third, many have required that participants respond to a hypothetical sexual encounter (McCormick, 1979; Perper & Weis, 1987) making generalizations to actual sexual interactions uncertain. Thus, it is not clear how much the general trend toward convergence of gender roles in sexual interactions extends to behavior within disagreement situations. The present study investigated gender differences in the use of sexual influence to resolve disagreement situations.

Method

Participants were 139 male and 159 female unmarried heterosexual undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology classes. All participants completed a background questionnaire and a number of attitudinal and behavioral scales. Participants were randomly assigned to complete either male or female versions of the Sexual Situation Questionnaire (SSQ), designed for this study. Forty-eight male and 49 female participants completed the male version of the SSQ, and 90 male and 111 female participants completed the female version of the SSQ. The male and female versions, respectively, consist of questions assessing situations experienced within the past year in which the

man or the woman desired a higher level of sexual activity than their partner. Respondents provided a variety of information about the most recent disagreement situation, including the relationship status, disputed level of sexual activity, preceding consensual sexual activities (if any), the verbal and nonverbal behaviors used to influence a partner to engage in the sexual activity, and the consequences of the disagreement interaction. In addition, participants identified the influence strategies used by the person who initiated the disputed level of sexual activity using a list of 45 influence strategies, and indicated whether the impact of each on their partner was positive, negative, or neutral.

Results

Approximately half (51%) of the relationships were classified as steady dating relationships; the rest were casual dates (32%) or first dates (17%). Participants reported that sexual intercourse was the level of sexual intimacy that most often constituted the disagreement (65%). Participants most frequently reported that the sexual activities engaged in immediately prior to the disagreement were hugging, kissing or necking, with 80.3% of the participants reporting some form of preceding consensual sexual activity. However, 19.7% of the participants reported that they had not engaged in any type of sexual activity prior to the disagreement. When asked to rate how pleasant the disagreement interaction was both at the time of the disagreement and at the time of the study, participants provided average ratings of 3.72 and 3.62, respectively, on a 6-point scale ranging from extremely unpleasant to extremely pleasant.

A 2 x 2 ANOVA (gender of initiator, gender of respondent) was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in reports of sexual disagreements between participants reporting male-initiated (i.e., in which the male desired a higher level of sexual activity) as opposed to female-initiated disagreements. A significant main effect was found for gender of initiator, $F(1, 294) = 35.04$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). Participants reported more male-initiated disagreements than female-initiated disagreements (M's = .89 and .57, respectively).

Insert Table 1 about here.

To assess whether male and female participants differed in reports of men's and women's influence behaviors, two 2 X 2 MANOVA's (sex of initiator, sex of respondent) were conducted with dummy variates corresponding to the categories of verbal or nonverbal influence behaviors as dependent variables. For verbal influence behaviors, an interaction between sex of initiator and sex of respondent was found, multivariate $F(2, 193) = 7.54$, $p < .01$. Examination of the univariate analyses indicated that both men and women reported the use of verbal persuasion by their partner more frequently than they reported for themselves (M's = .31 and .07, for partner and self, as reported by men, and M's = .44 and .20, for partner and self, as reported by women), $F(1, 194) = 13.87$, $p < .001$. Also, the main effect for sex of initiator was significant, $F(2, 193) = 6.92$, $p < .01$. Participants reported that men were more likely to verbally comply with a refusal than were women (M's = .49 and .26, respectively), $F(1, 194) = 11.49$, $p < .01$.

For nonverbal influence behaviors, the interaction between sex of initiator and sex of respondent was significant, multivariate $F(3, 192) = 3.39$, $p < .05$. Univariate analyses revealed that men reported more use of physical coercion by women than men reported for themselves and more than women reported for themselves (M's = .22, .02, and .07, respectively), $F(1, 194) = 8.23$, $p < .01$. The main effect for sex of initiator was again significant, multivariate $F(3, 192) = 3.03$, $p < .05$. Participants reported that men were more likely than women to continue pre-refusal sexual activities after a refusal (M's = .28 and .13, respectively), $F(1, 194) = 7.34$, $p < .01$.

Further, a 2 X 2 MANOVA (sex of initiator, sex of respondent) was conducted to assess differences in men's and women's use of positive, negative and neutral influence strategies. A significant interaction was found, multivariate $F(3, 192) = 12.36$, $p < .001$. Examination of the univariate analyses revealed that women reported the use of more negative strategies by men than they reported

on behalf of women (M's = 2.32 and .78, respectively), whereas men reported the use of more negative strategies by women than they reported on behalf of men (M's = 2.22 and .58, respectively), $F(1, 194) = 36.67$, $p < .001$.

A 2 X 2 ANOVA (sex or initiator, sex of respondent) was conducted to assess differences in the likelihood of engaging in the disputed level of sexual activity after the disagreement interaction for male-initiated and female-initiated disagreements. The main effect for sex of initiator was significant, multivariate $F(1, 194) = 18.79$, $p < .001$. Participants were more likely to report engaging in the disputed level of sexual activity after female-initiated disagreements than male-initiated disagreements, (M's = .31 and .07, respectively).

In order to index emotional consequences associated with the use of sexual influence, participants were asked to provide ratings of the pleasure associated with the disagreement interaction both at the time of the disagreement and at the time of the study. To assess differences in ratings of pleasure associated with male-initiated and female-initiated disagreements, a 2 X 2 MANOVA (sex of initiator, sex of respondent) was conducted with the two pleasure ratings as dependent variables. The interaction between sex of initiator and sex of respondent was not significant, multivariate $F(2, 193) = 2.17$, $p > .05$, nor the main effect for sex of initiator, multivariate $F(2, 193) = 1.90$, $p > .05$, indicating that ratings of pleasure associated with the two types of disagreements did not differ significantly as a function of gender.

Discussion

More participants had been in situations in which the man desired a higher level of sexual activity than in situations in which the woman desired a higher level of sexual activity. This finding corresponds to the traditional script designating men as the initiators and aggressors in sexual situations. However, a majority of participants reported incidents of women's use of sexual influence. This suggests that the stereotype of women as passive recipients of men's sexual advances is inaccurate. For the most part, the use of sexual influence in disagreement interactions did not appear

to be particularly aversive since most participants rated the time spent with their date as pleasurable.

When men and women use sexual influence, they seem to be adopting a similar script. For the most part, participants reported that men and women were equally likely to employ each of the verbal and nonverbal influence behaviors. The two exceptions contrast with the view of aggressive men. Men were more likely to verbally comply with a refusal and to engage in pre-refusal sexual activities after a refusal. It may be that men may be more aware that verbal compliance and engaging in pre-refusal sexual activities may be effective means of influencing a partner to engage in the disputed level of sexual activity later on that date. However, female-initiated disagreements were more likely to result in engaging in the disputed level of sexual activity than male-initiated disagreements. Alternately, men may be more likely than women to verbally comply with a date's wishes and to engage in pre-refusal sexual activities if they are more sensitive to women's refusals than women are to men's refusals.

Finally, the results reflect a tendency to view one's own behavior in more positive terms than one's partner's behavior. Both men and women reported the use of more negative strategies by their partner than by themselves. This trend may be related to the response bias noted in studies of sexual aggression where self-reported victimization rates are consistently higher than self-reported perpetration rates (e.g., Koss, et al., 1987). On the other hand, it is possible that participants did not intend their behavior to be negative and were unaware of the impact of their influence behaviors on their partner.

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Table 1.

Mean Frequency of Reports of Sexual Disagreement Interactions

	Gender of Respondent		
Gender of Initiator	Male	Female	Total
Male	.92	.85	$.89_a$
Female	.64	.49	$.57_a$

Note. Means with the same subscript differ significantly.

[a] $p < .001$.